

The Story of Esther Smith Pung

Hi, I'm Esther Pung. Most of you know me from my involvement with 4-H. My children insisted I give you a little background on myself that might interest you. In fact, they are the ones compiling this information. So consider the artistic license.

I was the second child born to Peter and Clara Smith in Clinton County on August 8, 1915. On the farm in 1917, Dad was warming tar on the wood burning stove while doing chores outside. The tar blew up - starting a fire. Mom carried me and told my older sister Frances, who was 3, to follow her out of the house. When mom got me to safety, she noticed Frances had not followed. The fire advanced so quickly no one could get back in the house to save her. Frances died on that day in the fire that destroyed the house.

Within the next year, my mom passed away due to blood poisoning from a ruptured appendix. My maternal grandparents, John and Catherine Pohl, thought it would be a good idea for me to live with them, during this time my dad lived with his parents. After awhile my dad could not handle being away from me. In one year he lost his first born, his wife and then his second daughter was not with him. So the two of us moved in with my paternal grandparents, Michael and Elizabeth Smith on Pratt Road. A number of my father's siblings were still living on the homestead at the time.

On August 3, 1923, all of us moved to 310 S. Westphalia St in Westphalia, where my daughter, Teresa and her husband Ken, presently live. I started school in a one room school house by the name of Gross School on the corner of Pratt and Grange when we lived on the farm. When we moved, I attended St. Mary Catholic School. Because I didn't know German when I entered that school, I was held back a year. How times have changed. I graduated Eighth Grade there and I graduated from Portland High School in 1934.

Lewis J. Pung and I were married on November 3, 1937 in St. Mary Church. He soon became part owner of the Westphalia Milling Company, both of our sons, Larry and Don worked there. Larry became a firefighter for the city of Lansing. Don became part owner of the Milling company. We moved into the house I had been living at since I was eight years old. My father and grandmother Elizabeth lived with us up to their deaths. At one time, there were four generations living in that one home. Not uncommon in those days. We had six BEAUTIFUL children, (did I mention my children wrote this biography?) 18 grandchildren, and 29 great-grandchildren (of which one is portraying me and is so very special to me ~ as they all are).

Our daughter Clara, expressed an interest in joining 4-H. In 1947, my involvement in 4-H began with the Riley Busy Bees and Melba Mohnke. In 1952, we became the organizational leaders of the Westphalia 4-H Club which was started in 1942. It was created by six talented hardworking homemakers, Rose Rademacher, Romilda Wieber, Verena Witgen, Beatrice Bohr, Dora Wieber, Mary Simon and Esther Thelen. The main projects at the time were Sewing and Gardening. In 1963 I solely led the 'Westphalia 4-H Club'. We had Fall Projects like clothing, knitting and crocheting as well as Summer Projects like foods, flower and vegetable gardening. With generous volunteers we were able to complete those projects for the big Clinton County Fair in August. One unique project was an electrical homemade flashlight assembled by our daughter Diane. She got the idea from watching MSU Public Television Station WKAR.

Lewis died October 30, 1967. He was buried on our 30th Wedding Anniversary. 4-H and the girls who would come over to the house to work on their projects kept me going after his unexpected death. By 1970 the club had grown to over 50 members. Mary Ann Hengesbach agreed to join me as leader. What a blessing! In 1975, club enrollment reached 136. Mary Ann and I split the club into two groups. Mary Ann took the younger group Second through Sixth Grades, I took the older members Seventh through Twelfth Grades. In 1980 we reached a peak of 152 members. I assisted in the completion of 80 to 100 projects each year during that time. Oh Hi, I see some of our former members out there today. Hope you're still sewing.

Officers were chosen by picking names out of a hat. Mary Ann would have the older girls fill the President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer positions and younger members fill the News Reporter and Activities Leader positions. This format gave all an equal opportunity, helped gain social confidence and provided training for younger members by older members.

I felt it was important for children to learn skills that not only would build self esteem but those skills that are also helpful in day-to-day living. Through 4-H I was able to teach decision making, problem solving and leadership skills. Several of the mothers were able to help me teach their girls the basics of sewing. I could not have helped the number of girls I did without these involved mothers. Students would come over after school, after supper, and on Saturdays. Whenever the time would work out for them. During these times with the children I so enjoyed sharing our German heritage. I always needed to find out if and how we were related. I learned a lot about them and their families - some of those stories are staying with me.

At times there were 3 sewing machines working at once with a fourth child working on hand sewing. One of the parents gave me the nickname of "Mrs. Sew 'n Sew" - get it? S-e-w s-e-w? My primary duties were guiding the children and their parents in the 4-H requirements and helping them meet their deadlines. Sometimes that meant scotch taping or basting the hem up for style review. That is where the girls would model their projects. Then they would later finish their items for the fair where they were judged for their workmanship.

For over 50 years I primarily taught sewing within the 4-H Club. From 1963 to 1970 I was the organizational leader. In 1971 I shared that responsibility with Mary Ann Hengesbach until 1994.

I was fortunate to receive the Clinton County 4-H Alumni Award in 2001. I was a past recipient of the Westphalia Citizenship Award, a member of the Christian Mothers Confraternity of St. Mary's and the Companions of Blessed Pauline and an early member of the Westphalia Historical Society. Thanks to Carol Simon's nomination and work, in 2003 I received the State of Michigan Volunteer Leadership Award.

In addition to sewing, I enjoyed dancing, traveling, gardening, trying new things, reading the daily paper and being with my family. My desire to be aware of what was happening around the world by reading the newspaper got some of my children to tease me about waking up at the kitchen with newsprint on my forehead. They aren't as funny as they think they are.

One of my trips included going to Great Britain to pick up a plane that had our daughter Elaine's name painted on it. An honor received by her from the airline company she worked for. What a joy! I even got to sit in the pilot seat. And I have pictures to prove it.

We "The Dancing Girls", as we were called, Carolyn Wirth, Rita Irrer and Rita Bohr, loved to follow the Mellow Tones wherever they played. As we advanced in age – Julius Bengel would drive us to these events.

I cannot forget to mention that when I was 10 years old my dad bought me a piano. Professor Loehre, who is also being honored here today, taught me how to play. He taught me the beat by tapping my shoulder to the measured time. That is why our family is so "rhythmic" – or maybe not?? Guess my family will be the only ones who gets this?

Thank you for attending.

All of these memories have contributed to who I am ~ or who I was.

Let me see that ~ oh, you need to rip that out and do it over.

